A WOMAN'S ENCHANTMENT

By William Le Queux

(Continued.)

Silence meant inability to respond. The scoundrel Garshore had caused his arrest!

When the London newspapers arrived I searched eagerly for any mention of the "Redcliffe Gardens Mystery." There was but little, merely a statement that the police were in possession of a clue, and that an arrest was only a matter of a few hours.

In deepest anxiety I remained in the neighborhood of the house until midday, assisting Myra to pick flowers for the table, and walking with her father in the rose garden. But no servant came out with the familiar orange-colored envelope.

What should I do? I could confide in nobody, but act solely upon my own initiative.

I had been drawn into the vortex of doubt and mystery by reason of my firm friendship with a man who, though an adventurer, was such for the pure love of adventure. Illogical as it may seem, Granny was an honest adventurer, who preyed only upon the scroundrally financier, the corrupt foreign statesmen or the promoters of rotten companies. To others he was scrupulously upright, to the poor even generous and to his friends firm and unwavering.

With myself, I may as well at once admit that there was no woman in the case. A love episode when I was twenty-one—an idyl with a tragic ending, for my well-beloved had died suddenly of heart-failure at a dance—and warped my affections and from that day I had gone through the world with heart hardened, preserving the memory of the one face that had been so very dear to me.

As regards means I was fairly well off, and as regards birth I was justly proud of being a Ralston. We, the Ralstons "of that ilk," were descended from the MacDuffs, Thanes or Earls of Fife, one of whom had a son Ralph. The latter, obtaining a grant of land in Renfrewshire, called it after his own name, Ralphs-toune. In process of time, according to Lower in his Patronymica Britannica, his descendants, continuing on the same estate, wrote themselves De Ralphs-toune, or, by softened pronunciation, Ralton.

My friends had, I think, often wondered that I had not married. But I was in the habit of airily assuring them that I was perfectly content in the freedom of bachelorhood. In my erratic wanderings hither and thither in two hemispheres I had met many pretty and attractive girls, but I can only suppose that my masculine blundering and blindness had prevented the love miscrobe from attacking me.

How strange it is that we all, women as well as men, declare ourselves invulnerable to Love, and yet sooner or later we all, without exception, fall the victims of Cupid's darts! Even the most vinegar-faced spinster of our acquaintance has, if the truth be told, suffered once from the twinge of the tiny arrow shot by the cherub.

Curious though it may be, at noon on that well remembered summer's day I was heart-whole and a fervent adherent to an easy bachelor life. Yet an hour later occurred an incident which changed my whole being and bade fair to entirely revolutionize my future.

To luncheon that day arrived a Mrs. Maynard, a pleasant, gray-haired lady, with her daughter Elfrida.

They came over in their big, red six-cylinder "Minerva," from Malton, where they lived, and Elfrida was apparently Myra's greatest friend.

As she introduced me and I stretched forth my hand I was conscious of a slim, neat-waisted figure in an embroidered gown of white cotton and a close-fitting motor-hat and veil. The face, showing through the half-drawn veil of champagne-colored silk, was the most perfect that I had ever seen. A pair of bright brown, mischivous eyes, a pair of dimpled cheeks, a sweet mouth and a brow which showed high intelligence arose before me. My gaze met hers, and she dropped her eyes instantly. Upon her cheeks was the faintest flush of shyness.

I took the little hand she offered, and its contact thrilled me.

I, Philip Ralston, the man who had so long prided himself upon his immunity from feminine wiles and blandishments, was at that instant in love.

I struggled against it. But I was already enmeshed.

I was actually in love!

CHAPTER XVIII.

Cunliffe Makes an Amazing Statement.

At three o'clock that afternoon, with excuses made to Mr. Stapleton and Myra, I mounted into the car, and with a merry farewell to the bright-eyed girl who had so fascinated me as she sat at my side at luncheon I was whisked down the drive and on to Malton station.

There had been no wire from Granny, therefore I feared the worst. Ralph Garshore had forestalled me.

On arrival at York I ---hed to the big bookstall and bought several evening papers, which I glanced through, expecting to see the report of a sensational arrest.

But there was nothing—not a single mention of the Redcliffe Gardens mystery could I find.

An express for Grantham was due in a few minutes. This I took, and duly arrived at the quiet, clean old market-town which, having lost its importance as a coaching station has of late become a popular stopping place for motoritsts.

At the old Angel and Crown I got a dogcart and was driven seven miles out up the hill along the North road through Great Ponton, past Crabtree House to Colsterworth village, where, at sunset, I arrived at the inn and was directed to Kelston cottage.

I experienced but little difficulty in finding it—a pretty, well kept house, standing back in a small garden filled with sweetsmelling old-world flowers, just outside the village, on the way to Woodsthorrpe. The ustic porch was smothered with crimson ramblers in full bloom, while upon one side of the place yellow roses half hid the wall.

My knock was responded to by a respectable old lady whose speech and manner told of quiet retirement. Probably she had seen better days.

When I asked for Dr. Blakeney she at once expressed regret that he had left on the previous afternoon.

She invited me into the clean little parlor, scented by the musk growing in the window, and in response to my inquiry said:

"Dr. Blakeney arrived at the inn a couple of days ago, and took apartments with me. He wished to be alone in order to study, he said, and preferred private rooms."

"He is a great student," I said. "He telegraphed me only yesterday that he was here. So I've come over from Malton to see him."

"He's a most charming man—such a good talker for one so deeply studious. He was telling me only yesterday morning what a great traveler he has been— studying ecclesiastical architecture. I told him he should see Little Ponton Church, which they say is pure Norman."

"But how came he to leave?" I inquired, anxiously.

"Well, about 5 o'clock yesterday two gentlemen, strangers in Colsterworth, called, and he seemed very surprised to see them. But he treated them cordially. I chanced to be looking out of the window and saw them approaching. They struck me as rather suspicious, from the confidential manner in which they were conversing."

"Yes," I said, breathlessly. "What then?"

"Well, Dr. Blakeney received them in this room, which he had as a sitting room. The door was shut, and for nearly half an hour they seemed to be engaged in a long discussion. He came out, looked rather pale, and obtained a bottle of brandy and three glasses from the dining room. Then a quarter of an hour afterward he came to me, and, speaking in a tone quite unusual, paid me and expressed his great regret at being compelled to leave at once—on very urgent business. He only had one suit case—quite new it seemed—and he took that with him. All three walked together into the village, and I hear they drove back into Grantham."

"Did he mention where he was going?" I asked. "This departure was very sudden?"

"Very sudden," she exclaimed. "Only an hour before he was quite lively and cheerful, telling me how much he had enjoyed a walk he had taken alone through the fields on the previous day. But it seemed that his friends induced him to return to London."

"To London! Then he went back to London?"

"Yes, I know that, because as I passed the door I heard one of the men say, 'You must go back to London with us.'"

My heart fell within me.

"What were these two friends like? Describe them."

"Both wee gentlemanly-looking men, and Londoners from their speech."

"The doctor gave you no instructions as regards letters, I suppose?"

"None. But he said he hoped to return ere long. I fear he won't however, because he took all his belongings with him."

I stood speechless. The truth was palpable. Even the good woman who had been Ganny's landlady had her suspicions aroused by the pair from London. Could one of them have been Garshore himself?

I questioned her and came to the conclusion that both men were detectives. She put them down as Londoners. This caused me to reflect, and I saw that from the moment of the receipt of his telegram to me at Stapleton Grange to the moment of his arrest, there would be just sufficient time for warning to be given to Scotland Yard and the arrival of police officers.

"He had not been gone ten minutes when a telegram arrived for him," the good lady remarked. "That, of course, I gave back to the boy."

My warning wire, without a doubt.

I dined at the inn, and in an hour's time was in the "up Scotsman"—which was, fortunately, a little late—traveling swiftly towards King's Cross.

I well knew that, on my return to my chambers, I should at once fall again under the surveillance of the police. To me that mattered but little. Indeed, my mind as I sat alone in the railway carriage was full of other thoughts—thoughts of the beautiful, bright-eyed girl beside whom I had sat at luncheon that day, and who had charmed me by her beauty, by her conversation and by her innate daintiness. I was in love—desperately, honestly and hopelessly in love.

On the other hand, however, I was haunted by the fear of catastrophe. Had Granny been arrested?

Why had he, at the order of the two strangers, returned so suddenly to London? The one fact that he had not sent any word to me showed his inability to do so. And inability meant arrest!

At last we ran into King's Cross, where I sprang into a cab and drove straight to my chambers, arriving at about 11:30.

I switched on the light and found a pile of letters on my stable. One of them was, I saw, from Cunliffe. It was marked "Very urgent" in his neat handwriting, and I tore it open.

Would I go 'round to Dane's Inn at once on my arrival to town? He wished to see me most particularly.

Dane's Inn was always open, therefore I took a cab along the Strand, passed the commisionaire, who acted as night porter and saluted me, and just after midnight knocked at my friend's door.

Yes! There was movement within. He was at home.

"My dear fellow!" he cried on seeing me. "Come in! I've been very anxious about you, wondering where you'd got to."

I followed him into his shabby sitting room. He was in evening clothes, and apologized for them by saying:

I've just been to a confounded city dinner. Only worth a par, but had to sit the whole thing out. Have a drink?" and he pushed the whisky and siphon in my dir---- as I seated myself in the old armchair.

"Well," I asked at last, "what makes you so anxious about me?"

"Because I want to tell you something privately, Phil, old chap," he answered, looking at me very seriously. "You recollect that curious affair in Redcliffe Gardens, don't you?"

"Certainly."

"Then just tell me the truth. Granville Gough, whom everybody calls Granny, a thorough-going cosmopolitan, is a friend of yours. I recollect you speaking of him."

"Certainly he is."

"Well, the police are in search of him. They are convinced that he killed that poor woman."

I held my breath, and tried to appear surprised.

"I think the police are slightly off the track this time, George," I said quite calmly. "You can tell Morton that, with my compliments."

"But my dear fellow, there's evidence."

"Circumstantial only." I said. "Gough knew the woman."

"More than that, it is alleged that the woman was his enemy."

"Who was she?" I asked quickly.

"Her name is not known."

"Who's the informant?"

"Morton hasn't told me."

"Is is a man named Garshore?"

Cunliffe fixed his keen eyes upon mine in silence for a few seconds. Then he replied:

"I don't exactly know, but I've heard that name mentioned in connection with the inquiries."

"Is Granny arrested?"

"Ive not heard of it. He's in hiding somewhere near Grantham, the police have ascertained."

"But tell me, George," I said, "what's the evidence that causes the police to suspect?"

"It was contained in some baggage he left at the Cecil, which was at once seized by the police. There was found a tiny bottle which Sir Henry Kershaw, the home office analyst, has been experimenting on for the past couple of days."

"What!" I gasped.

"They found in one of your friend's bags the stuff with which the murder was undoubtedly committed," replied the journalist.

I sat staring at him, aghast.

"I know, old fellow, quite well, that Fielder of Scotland Yard followed you both down at Sydenham, and that you very cleverly gave him the slip. He came back furious," my friend laughed. "You were afterward watched, but you also dodged out of the way. As a matter of fact I never expected you back at Talbot House so soon."

"I had no reason for absence," I declared. "I've committed no crime."

"But you've assisted a criminal to escape—which places you, my dear Phil, in a rather awkward predicament," he remarked. "And the criminal was, without doubt, one of the cleverest and most ingenious who has ever troubled the London police. His methods, they declare, are marvelous, and this certainly is not his first crime."

"Do you, therefore, believe that my friend, Granny Gough, is an assassin of women?" I demanded fiercely. "Recollect, he and I are friends."

"I don't care a hang for that, Ralston," answered the journalist. "I'm merely telling you the police theory."

"They've blundered in this instance," I asserted.

My friend only shrugged his shoulders and drew hard at his cigar.

"You believe Gough killed that woman?" I cried.

"Yes, Ralston, I do," he answered. "And the reason I wanted to speak with you is to warn you of the danger in acting as his accomplice."

"He's my friend."

"I know that. But surely there is a point where the bond of friendship breaks."

"Yes, Cunliffe. It will snap only when Granny is condemned by a jury."

"Why has he fled?" asked the journalist.

His question was a decidedly awkward one. That self-same problem had presented itself to me constantly during the past couple of days—a problem that was beyond solution.

Where was Gough? Why, indeed, had he fled if innocent?

But was he not guilty? Had he not, on that night down at Sydenham, admitted his fear of the police?

My thoughts wandered to the fair-faced girl who trusted him, and who had refused to hear the words of the slanderer. And they wandered also to the brown-haired woman whose bright eyes held me in a strange fascination such as I had never before experienced.

"Shall I tell you, Ralston, why Gough has fled?"

"Because of this unfounded accusation against him," I said.

"No. Because of the witnesses against him."

"Witnesses?" I cried hoarsely, staring at my friend.

"Yes—two. One of them is a man—a clever international thief named Winch, alias Grinfield, and the other a woman—or rather a girl."

"A girl! Whom?"

"Her name is Elfrida Maynard."

"Elfrida!" I gasped, springing from my chair.

And I stood facing him, open mouthed, and utterly staggered.

Was Elfrida Maynard, whose peerless countenance now rose ever before me, actually a witness against my best, my dearest friend?

To be Continued.)